



VAN ASTEN'S VISITOR

Astro Looks Into the Queer Case of a Doctored Will

BY ALAN BRAGHAMPTON

Drawing by George Brehm

back of his head and his overcoat collar was turned up about his ears. Keen, quick, and clear cut, his features showed handsomely in profile. He was the popular member of the firm among his affluent clientele.

"Looks like a blizzard," said the clerk, rummaging in a pasteboard letter holder.

"Sure. The midnight train is sure to be either stalled or delayed, and I can go Saturday just as well. I don't care to sit up for hours in a snowbank." Then he turned suddenly to the clerk. "Say, has anybody from Selvig's been in to-day?" he asked.

"You mean about the Drellmont will case?"

"Yes. By the way young Drellmont spoke yesterday, I rather expect he's getting ready to compromise. He's a fool if he doesn't; and a bigger fool to expect me to show him the will, too!"

"Nobody's been in," said the clerk laconically.

Van Asten went out and plowed his way through rising drifts to the subway station. By six o'clock he was at the Gavel Club, and by eight had finished his dinner. Several games of pool, a long talk with a visiting Englishman, perusal of the French comic papers, and convivial gossip with late comers from the theaters full of tales of the storm, kept him warm and cheerful till midnight. Then, as the clock struck, he put on his things and went out.

There were few abroad at this hour, and not a carriage or an automobile in sight. The street car lines had given up trying to keep the tracks clear, and he came across one darkened car abandoned in the snow. He had to fight his way home, struggling through drifts waist high. It was deathly quiet except for the sound of the wind.

HE reached his apartment house at last, and, stamping and shaking himself, climbed four flights of stairs, the elevator being out of order. At his door he stopped, surprised. Under the door there was a thin streak of light.

Van Asten's firm was still too young to enable him to live in the style he had been used to before going into business. His apartment consisted of only four rooms—a large, L-shaped studio, a bedroom, and, off the entrance hall, on one side a bathroom, and on the other a kitchenet. A woman came in every morning to clean up the place; except for that, he was alone.

He distinctly remembered that no light had been left burning, as he had left the place at ten o'clock that morning. What, then, could the light mean? No one save the janitor had a key to the place. His thought went naturally to burglars. He hesitated for some moments, wondering what to do. It was late to summon the janitor for assistance, and he would appear foolish if nothing serious had happened. He determined to investigate alone, and, prepared for an immediate struggle, he put his key quietly into the door and turned the latch. The door opened without noise, and he could see through the one opposite into the long studio.

There, a woman in chinchilla furs stood, with her back to him, beside the great table. She was bending over, as if taking something from a bag.

The tension of suspense that had knotted Van Asten's muscles and nerves gave way to a little laugh. The romance of the encounter amused him vaguely, though his curiosity was doubly alert. He took a step forward.

At the sound of his footsteps, the woman looked round quickly, and for a minute stood staring at him with an expression of alarm. Her hand went to her heart. She was a beautiful woman of twenty-three, dressed with elegance. She was a vivid blonde, with masses of heavy yellow hair, blue eyes, and slender hands. For a single moment she stood there, immobile; then, to Van Asten's amazement, she ran forward and threw her arms about his neck and pressed her lips to his cheek.

"Oh, Paul! I'm so glad you've come! I didn't know what to do! I was afraid

I'd have to stay here all night alone! Where in the world have you been?"

Van Asten calmly disentangled himself from her embrace and took another look at her face. She was blushing violently. "Will you kindly tell me, first of all, who you are?"

"Why, Paul! What in the world do you mean?"

"I mean I haven't the pleasure of your acquaintance, and naturally I have a little curiosity about a visitor at this hour."

For a second or two she gazed at him steadily, her lips parted. "Are you drunk, Paul?" she demanded finally.

"I'm not drunk. I simply don't know you. Why should I?"

"You don't know your own sister!" she exclaimed in a vibrant, intense tone. Then she took a backward step, as if she feared him.

"My sister is in Boston." He stared at her with a frown and folded his arms. "What is your little game, anyway?"

"You don't know your own sister!" she repeated helplessly. Then she staggered back and sunk into a chair, hiding her face in her hands, and began to weep.

"You are not my sister, and you know it as well as I do! What do you want here, anyway?" he demanded, still standing, staring at her.

"Why, I want to stay here, of course! I've just come from Boston to visit you!" She suddenly sprang up. "The idea! It's a stupid practical joke you're playing on me, of course. Come, Paul, drop it, please! I'm tired, and want to go to bed. Where are you going to put me?"

"I'm going to put you outdoors!" he retorted.

"In this awful blizzard?" she demanded. She smiled sadly through her tears. The effect was really dazzling; but Van Asten kept his head.

He stopped and reflected for a few moments. Then, without tak-

ing his eyes from her, he took off his hat and overcoat, tossed them aside, and sat down.

"Now," he continued, "I insist that you drop this masquerade and tell me immediately who you are and how you came here. You're either crazy, or it's some sort of blackmailing game. If you know anything about my sister, you know you don't in the least resemble her, and if you know anything about me, you know I haven't any money. So, out with it, quick!"

"I've told you!" she said, and loosed another pathetic smile at him.

He frowned impatiently. "Then you are crazy!"

"No, I'm afraid you are!"

The deadlock continued for some minutes before either spoke again. Then he began more quietly. "I don't know what's the matter with you. It's too much for me. But of course I can't let you stay here. Neither can I put you out into this storm. The only thing I can think of is to telephone to some one to come here. But no woman could get here to-night, even if she should be willing to. I confess I don't know what to do with you."

"It's perfectly all right," she answered sweetly.

"I'm your sister, and surely you should be willing to let me have your room for to-night. You can sleep on that big couch round the corner of the studio, and you'll be sober in the morning. When you wake up, you'll probably recognize me. I won't be hard on you, my dear. Only really you ought to be careful what you drink." She rose, walked over to him, and patted his head.

He jumped up abruptly and walked away, opened his bedroom door, and stood there for a moment. "Come in here!" he commanded.

"All right, Paul!" she answered with extravagant humility, and, casting down her eyes, walked into the room. Just before she closed the door she came near him again.

"Aren't you going to kiss me goodnight, Paul dear?" she asked.

Without answering her, he pulled the door to, and heard her swiftly lock it on the inside. Then, still frowning, he walked up and down the long studio for ten minutes. Once or twice he stopped outside the door to listen; but heard nothing. Later, she called out "Goodnight, Paul!" to him, in blithe accents. He bit his lip and resumed his promenade, more worried than ever. The thing was uncanny. He no longer accepted the situation as romantic; he felt decidedly uncomfortable and embarrassed. Some one was making a fool of him, or worse.

SUDDENLY, a thought came to him, and he went to the telephone and spoke as low as possible, "Madison, 5555."

For fully three minutes he waited without receiving a reply.

"Madison 5555 doesn't answer," came the word at last.

"Ring 'em up again!" He spoke a bit more loudly.

In two minutes more he heard, "Hello!"

"Is this Astro?"

"Yes. What the deuce—?"

"Wait a minute and I'll explain."

"Well, hurry up! You've got me up out of bed."

"I'm Paul Van Asten, and am in my apartment at the Elton, 444 West 21st-st. I've just come home and found a strange woman in my place. She says she's my sister. Pretty and all that, well dressed, and not otherwise obviously mad. But she worries me. I can't put her out; and she won't go, anyway. What'll I do? Can't you come over here? It's mighty embarrassing."

There was a pause, then



She Stood Staring at Him with an Expression of Alarm.

this inquiry, "Did you find her before she saw you?"

"Yes, opened the door, and there she was."

"What was she doing?"

"Standing up, looking into a bag, or something."

"Dressed for the street?"

"Yes, it looked as if she had just come in."

"Did you say how long she had been there?"

"I think she did say she'd waited sometime."

"Where is she now?"

"Locked in my bedroom."

"Good. I'll come right over. I can't get a cab in this blizzard; so it may take half or three-quarters of an hour."

"All right. But for heaven's sake hurry! I don't know what she'll do next!"

"Oh, wait. Describe her, please!"

"A blonde, with yellow hair, and lots of it. Rather small, with blue eyes. Chinchilla stole and muff."

"All right. Goodbye. I'll hurry."

Van Asten hung up the receiver with a sigh of relief. He had heard much of Astro the Seer and

his marvelous solution of mysteries; but the young lawyer did not place much faith in these sensational tales. Astro was, however, a close student of human nature, and, if not intuitive, at least shrewd, and his knowledge of society, and his willingness to undertake any case, however delicate, made him a desirable companion in so embarrassing a crisis.

Van Asten threw himself into a chair commanding a view of the bedroom door and took up a book. No sound came from his chamber. From all that could be gathered, his erratic visitor had gone to bed and to sleep. Now that he was sure of a tactful and clever companion, he rather looked forward to seeing the girl again. He could at last permit his imagination to play with the situation. It might be, after all, a romance—who could tell? The girl was pretty and cultured. No great scandal could ensue with two men there; and somehow, with his luck or his astuteness, Astro would bring the affair to a pleasant solution. A half-hour went by. Van Asten yawned, read

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THE CLOCKS

By Frank Crane

HERE I am in a hospital, and it's very wearying. Funny! I've always wanted so to come to New York; and when I did come it was not to go to the opera and the theaters and to do all sorts of grand things, but to lie in a hospital! It reminds me of old Mrs. Bender down home, who suffered for years with rheumatism and was always wanting to go to church. She went at last; but it was to her own funeral.

To-day the doctor said I might write a little. I told him I wanted to. I have a fancy to put down some of my curious impressions.

First, I want to tell about my clocks. There are three of them. One, a small brass and glass French timepiece, which will strike the hour and the quarter hour when you push a button, ticks very fast. It pats along just like a little child running down the street. It stands right by my big Morris chair where I sit near the window. It is my own. Henry gave it to me. Another is an old fashioned, bold faced affair in dark wood, and belongs to the hospital. It ticks very loud, and slower than my brass one; it goes like a man walking. The third is an old grandfather's clock which stands in the hall just outside my door. It ticks like one slowly pacing up and down in deep thought.

Often in the night I lie awake listening to all three. I concentrate my mind on one, and then cannot hear the others. Then I attend to two of them, excluding the third. Then I listen to all three. And they give me the strangest thoughts!

When I began to come out of my unconscious state, their voices were the first things I heard. Glock-glock-glock-glock went the big one; and tock-tock-tick-tick-tock-tock went the middle sized one; and tick-tick-tick-tick-klack-klack-klack-klap-klap-klack went the little French repeater. It seemed as if I was hearing the footsteps of my soul, now plodding, now walking faster, now running, and again dropping back to a slow pace, as I climbed up from the valley of the shadow into day.

Then all the old events returned to my memory and came stepping in to the measure of the clock beats.

GLOCK-glock-glock-glump-glog, the hall clock slowly ticked, and it was as if I heard the rain-drops falling from the eaves down on the tin porch roof there in our big house in Virginia, as I crouched at the window of my bedroom and leaned my head on my folded arms, and smelled the soft, wet night air. I had tried and tried to cry; but could not, my eyes were so dry and hot, and my heart just like a dead cinder. Henry had gone. I had sent him away. And I loved him, I loved him so! And I love him yet. And I always will. I will never, never, never love anybody else as long as I live! As I didn't die, I suppose I shall be a trained nurse, or something awful. Being a Protestant, I presume I couldn't be a nun.

Then I heard the square wooden clock,—plock-plock-plickety-plock-plash-plick-plock-klock,—and it sounded just like the hoofbeats of Henry's horse trotting down the pike road, that night I sent him away. For the longest time I could not get those hoofbeats out of my brain. They tramped and tramped through my heart and up and down my nerves all night; and during the day when everything happened to be still I could hear them coming out of the silence and making me dizzy and sick.



Father Came Down at Midnight and Found Me Collapsed on the Floor.

Then I would cough or laugh or try to sing or move about, and mother would say, "Why, Marguerite, what ails you? You can never be still a minute!"

All these scenes kept returning to me with the resurgence of life as I lay over there on the little white bed. And every drop of reviving health was a drop of pain to me. That little French clock was on the mantel right near where we stood, Henry and I, the night of our quarrel.

Why did I quarrel with him? Why did I, indeed! There's no reason except just my foolish, hot, mad, Southern blood, and my dreadful, dreadful temper! You could see from my black eyes what a disposition I have. As I glance up to the mirror I seem to see myself all eyes; for my face is so white and wan. And my heavy raven's wing hair, which Henry would always be praising, has a thin streak of gray in it. Oh, I wish I could have been created less intense! Why did my Maker mingle such strange fire in my clay?

Tick-tick-tick-tick-klack-klack-klack-klack-ticky-tick-tock-tick, I heard the little brass clock away deep down yonder as I climbed up from death. And it brought back the scene all again.

WE stood, we two, by the mantel. There was a little fire in the fireplace; for it was chilly out, and March in Virginia is fickle. I was dressed in my white muslin, with Henry's violets at my throat. And he was so handsome! I never saw him so fine looking and noble as he was when he stood there and listened to me saying bitter things to him.

What did I say, and what was it all about? Why answer? What difference does it make? It was a lovers' quarrel, and about—nothing. I was angry and jealous and fierce as a wicked tiger. And I talked to him so cruelly! I wanted to rouse him,

to sting him to reply, to violence; but he just stood there, with one hand on the mantel, and looked at me with such terrible eyes, and his face was so drawn and pale! And when I had finished he turned and left the room without a word. Silence! All he gave me back was silence, and silence I think is the most awful thing in this world. During that moment's silence, when I had ceased speaking, and he stood still regarding me, the little clock kept clattering on,—klik-klick-klick-klick-blatt-blatt-blatt-blatt-fool-fool-fool-fool-ha-ha-ha-ha-glug-glug-glug-giggle, it taunted me. I wanted to smash it!

He'll never come back to me. I know he never will. He's too proud. I know those Sherwoods. They are all so haughty! He never will come back to me.

For it was so coarse and vulgar of me. It showed him, I suppose, all in a flash how utterly unworthy I was of him, and what a cheap, petty nature I have. How I envy him! He could run away from me; but I cannot ever escape from myself!

There I stood, as if frozen stiff, there by the hearth-stone, and heard him close the door and call the man to bring his horse. And then I heard that hideous trot-trot-trot-trot of the beast down the drive and out on the pike. I can hear it now,—I have heard it over and over again in the long white nights, when the square clock goes chock-chock-chick-chock-tlop-tock-tockety-klock, and my lover rides away, and all my joy goes with him.

Father came down stairs about midnight and found me collapsed on the floor. After that I kept getting worse. I had struck my head against a chair as I fell, and it did something to my brain. Father and mother questioned me closely; but I never told them anything about our quarrel, just said it was a fainting spell.

Then followed long days and interminable nights, and it is hard to say which were the worse. And then they brought me up here to this hospital.

IT has been several days since I wrote. Aunty Griswold has been in to see me, and she was so sweet and sympathetic that before I knew it I had told her all about our quarrel. I made her solemnly promise never to tell a living soul.

Yesterday Aunty said she had seen Henry. He is in New York! Think of it! I suppose he will marry Julie McGruder. She is so rich and handsome, too! It is a pity she is so shallow. I want him to be happy and marry some one worthy of him.

All last night I kept waking up, though lately I've been sleeping better. And whenever I awoke I could hear my heart beating; it raced with the French clock—bump-bump-bump-bump-dub-dub-dub-dub-bop-op-bop-op-bub-bub-dup-dup—so fast and fierce!

I wish I could see him again! If he would only pass along under this window!

And then I heard the great clock in the hall, as if it shook its head and sadly said, "No-no-no-no-never-no-nevermore-oh-ho!" I pushed my head away down in the pillow and cried. Oh, I love him so, and he is so grand and good, and I would be so humble and sweet to him, and never, never give way to my dreadful temper, if it could all be undone! But what's done's done,—go-go-go-on-no-never-nevermore-walk-on-forever-and-ever-alone-alone—

And then I started up with a scream that brought the nurse running to me.

"What is it?" she asked.

"The clock—the hall clock!" I cried, and then burst out laughing.

She was alarmed. "What about it?" she said.

"It has stopped!" I cried.

And sure enough it had run down.

SINCE I wrote yesterday things have happened. I must chatter about it to somebody; so it will be to this friendly bit of paper.

Toward noon the nurse brought in a great box of roses. And Henry's card was there! I made the nurse go out, and I just took those roses in my arms and sat hugging them and—well, acting very silly. But can you blame me? It was so sweet of him! He did remember me a little! On the back of his card he had written "For Auld Lang Syne."

The little French clock was very gay. It kept chuckling,—hay-hay-hay-hay-pat-pat-pat-pat-happy-happy-happy-kick-kick-klickety-kick-jig-jig-snicker-snicker. When I looked up at it I could have sworn that one of its keyholes winked at me.

Everything was all right now. So long as he thought of me a little tenderly, I could go on and live.

Tock-tock-krok-krok-tick-tock, went the square clock. And then I heard a footstep on the stair—top-top-slip-top-tock-tock. Some one was coming! I knew his step! How could I endure it if he should ever open that door?

He did open it. He stood there—oh, so handsome and wonderful—and gazed at me as I sat crushing my roses to my breast.

"Marguerite!" he spoke, all husky.

"You don't hate me, do you, Henry?" I said in the meekest voice in the world.

"My darling!" he cried, and then he moved swiftly to me and knelt down and gathered me and the roses and everything in his big, strong arms.

And as I was all crumpled up there the horror and self loathing and dread of life floated away like a black cloud.

Then I pushed him away and looked up with a happy smile breaking through my teary face and said, "Listen, Henry, listen! The clocks are all striking!"



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Van Asten's Visitor

Continued from page 8

a little, and again fell into a reverie. It was three-quarters of an hour before the electric bell sounded. Van Asten ran to the door, threw it open, and Astro, covered with snow, picturesque in slouch hat and Inverness cape, entered.

"Well," he said amusedly, stamping his feet, "when did she leave?"

"She didn't!" said Van Asten. "She's in that room now."

"Oh, didn't she?" Astro shrugged his shoulders. "Well, let's see her."

"But, heavens! you can't open that door! She's probably in bed and asleep! And besides, the door's locked."

"So it is," said Astro, trying the handle. "I shall have to ask you for a buttonhook."

"I haven't any except one in that room," said Van Asten.

Astro reflected a moment. Then he asked, "Have you any canned goods in your larder?"

"I have some canned chicken, I believe. Why?"

"And a gas stove, I presume?"

"Yes," Van Asten looked puzzled, but led the way to the kitchenet. He took down a tin of chicken and handed it to the Seer.

Astro removed the key, fastened to the top for the purpose of opening the tin, then went to the stove and lighted a burner. He heated the split wire till it was redhot; then, taking a pair of small pliers from his pocket, bent the end into a right angle. Returning to the chamber door, he inserted this rough skeleton key into the lock.

"I'll take the responsibility of awakening or disturbing your visitor," he said, smiling at Van Asten. "You must give me full authority to do what I please."

As he spoke he was trying the lock. After some unsuccessful attempts, the bolt shot back. He turned the handle and threw open the door. "Light up!" he commanded sharply.

VAN ASTEN, more embarrassed than ever, stepped to the switch on the wall, and the room was immediately illuminated. Then, staring about him, and finally at Astro, he stammered, "By Jove! She has gone, hasn't she?"

"Of course. You didn't really expect her to spend the night, did you?"

"Well, that's what she said she was going to do. I'm glad she didn't. I confess. Unless—"

then he stopped suddenly. "By Jove!" he ejaculated. "Could she have been a burglar?"

His eyes roved round the room in trace of corroboration of his surmise, and fell upon a partly raised window which gave on an inner court, or air shaft.

"Could she have escaped that way?" He ran to the window and threw up the sash.

As he did so, Astro stooped to the floor and picked up a hairpin, glanced at it, and put it into his pocket. It was of silver, fully six inches long, evidently specially made for a woman with an immense mass of hair. He said nothing of his discovery, however; but followed Van Asten to the window.

"She could hardly have got out that way," said the young lawyer.

"It's unlikely," Astro assented; "but I see you have a reading lamp. I wonder if it will reach to the window?"

He took it from the table, and, finding that the electric wire was long enough, held it above his head outside the window and looked down to the bottom of the court.

"I don't see her," Van Asten laughed.

If Astro saw anything, he did not mention it. He drew himself in, replaced the lamp, and pulled down the sash.

"I didn't expect to see her hanging by the hair of her head, like Absalom," he remarked. "But," he added casually, "what kind of hair did she have?"

"Yellow hair, pounds and pounds of it, apparently, though you never can tell nowadays, when all the women are wearing rats."

"Where is your telephone?" the Seer inquired.

Van Asten led the way back into the studio. Around the corner, out of sight of the chamber door, the receiver stood on his library table.

"She got out while you were talking to me," said Astro. "That's plain enough. Now, the question is, what's missing?"

BY Jove! That's true! But I didn't notice any disturbance. Hold on! He stood for a moment with his eyes fixed. "The Dreilmont will! Good Lord! if she came for that—" Instead of finishing, he ran back to the chamber. Astro followed him quickly enough to find him at a writing desk there, rummaging through the pigeonholes.

He stopped and exclaimed "Thank the Lord!" and held up a package of papers. "Here it is, safe enough. It wasn't that she wanted, at any rate."

"What about the Dreilmont will?" Astro inquired casually.

"Why, I took it home yesterday to study on the case with it. You've heard of Albert Dreilmont, of course?"

"The millionaire? Yes."

"Then you know he had a scapegrace son, who went to the bad a year or so ago. Well, this is the will disinheriting him. Old Dreilmont had made another only a few months before, leaving his son the bulk of his property. Young Dreilmont has been trying to bluff his way into the fortune, by claiming his legacy under the old will and asserting this to be a forgery. This, you see, is in favor of his half-sister."

He handed the document to Astro, who took it and examined it carefully.

"Dreilmont's attorneys are a sharp lot; but Dreilmont himself hasn't a cent, and I don't

see how he can afford to fight the case, considering what little show he has against his sister. In fact, I've been expecting an offer to compromise. He came in this morning and wanted to see our will. Of course I shouldn't have showed it to him if I had had it; but I told him it was here. If it had been stolen, we should have been up against it, though we should have won in the end."

"What was the date of the former will?"

"January 1, 1908."

"And this, I see, is just six months later, July 1, 1908."

"Yes, it was made after Dreilmont junior had that affair with a chorus girl. The papers were full of it. After that, he went West and got into more scrapes. I understand the police are after him now. My client, Miss Dreilmont, has wanted to compromise, just to get rid of him; but I wouldn't have it."

"I see," Astro spoke abstractedly as he handed back the document. He was sitting near the secretary, and, as he listened, had picked up a red blotter that lay on the desk. As he rose, he kept it in his hand, and when Van Asten put the will away Astro put the blotter into his pocket.

There was a strange light in his eyes, however, as he gazed at the young lawyer. It was as if he was analyzing him, deliberately, scientifically, reading his character in his features, one by one, weighing his soul in the balance.

"Well, I think I can't do anything more now," he said, finally. "I'll try to get home before the drifts have got any higher. If you miss anything else, telephone me. You might inquire of the janitor, too. He may know how your visitor got in."

"What do you think she wanted, anyway?" said Van Asten.

"Ah! I can't tell you that—yet. But there are evil vibrations here. I feel wrong. She wanted no good, you may be sure of that. I shall go into a psychic trance and try the crystals."

Van Asten smiled. It did not escape Astro's notice.

"Having engaged my services," he said calmly, "I shall expect you to follow my instructions to the letter. I can help you; and I think you need more aid than you imagine."

Van Asten immediately became serious. "I believe you do know something," he said. "Well, I don't care how you find out. I know I can trust you. Let me know what to do, and I'll do it."

AS Astro opened the outer door of the Elton, the drifts were two feet high. The snow drove in gusts of fine, icy particles, and it was bitterly cold. The flakes came in squalls, driving clouds before them; one could scarcely stand upright against the blast. He bent his head forward and fought his way. Before he had gone a block his hands and ears were almost frozen. Another block, and he sought refuge in a doorway to beat himself, rub his ears, and stamp a little warmth into his feet.

There was a drift filling a corner of the doorway, and, as his eyes fell on it, he saw a black patch beneath. Brushing the snow aside, he came upon a woman, unconscious with the cold. She was dressed in black, and wore chinchilla furs. Her heavy yellow hair was fastened with long silver pins.

Bending over her, he tried to restore her to consciousness; but it was impossible. Her hands and feet were indubitably frozen, and she had succumbed to the exposure. The covering of snow had, in a way protected her; but the case was desperate. What was there to do? Outside in the street there were no signs of life. Had the doorway been that of a residence, he might have rung the bell and appealed to the mercy of the residents. But it was the entrance to a small office building, and no one would be in at this hour. Astro was ten blocks from his studio. He had reasons for wanting to be alone with the girl. A little scrap of chinchilla fur he had found caught in the outer doorway of the Elton fitted suspiciously with a torn place at the end of this woman's astrachan stole, and her hairpins matched the one in his pocket.

A BLACK splotch came into view down the avenue. It was a two-horse carriage, laboring painfully into the teeth of the blizzard. As it approached, Astro ran out and bribed or bullied the driver into taking him and the woman to 34th-st. It took half an hour, and more than once the man on the box stopped and protested that he would have to give it up. But they finally arrived at No. 234, and, taking the inanimate form in his arms, Astro carried her up stairs.

His first action, after depositing her on a sofa, was to ring for a doctor. His next was to telephone to Valeska Wynne, his assistant, and urge her to attempt to come immediately to the studio. Then he returned to his charge.

She still gripped a leather bag in her frozen hands. Astro separated the stiffened fingers and put the bag away. Next, he got brandy and forced it down her throat. Wrapping her in warm blankets, he chafed her hands with snow till the doctor arrived. Leaving the two alone for a few minutes, he opened the bag quickly. It contained several bills, a bunch of keys, a handkerchief, and a penciled note. This he opened. The notepaper was imprinted with the name of the Swastika Hotel. It read as follows:

"The job must be done to-night, or it will be too late. S. will give up to-morrow. Do it if you can, and let me know immediately here. P. D."

Valeska, living only two blocks away, succeeded in arriving at the studio by four o'clock

in the morning. By the time she came in Astro and the doctor had restored their patient to consciousness and the use of her limbs. The woman was, however, weak and suffering. Rest was enjoined, and the doctor left definite instructions that she was to remain in bed all day.

WHAT I want you to do, Valeska," said Astro, "is, when this lady awakens, to talk with her long enough to study her voice. By nine o'clock you must be able to give an imitation of it that will pass over a telephone wire without being detected."

He proceeded, then, to narrate the whole story of the night, from the time he was awakened by Van Asten's message. Valeska listened attentively.

"You say that when you looked down the airshaft you saw a small broken bottle at the bottom?"

"Yes. I expected that. And here's another clue." He took the blotter from his pocket and passed it to her. "Do you see anything significant in that?" he asked.

"There's a spot where the ink that was on it has disappeared," she said. "But I don't quite see what that means. You say the date of his will was all right, wasn't it? I thought first that she might have gone down there to alter the date, and so make the old will valid."

"But, in that case, the marks of the erasure, even if done with Labarraque's solution or any of the ready made ink destroyers, would have proved that it had been tampered with."

"That's so. Well, I'll think it over. But do you know who this girl is, yet?"

"She's a friend of Paul Dreilmont's, and no doubt his tool." Astro passed over the note he had found in the bag.

"I see. I'm to report to him, then, over the telephone, in her voice, that the thing has been done?"

"By no means. You're to tell him that you failed."

Valeska bent her brows over the riddle. "Well, I hope I won't have to go into details."

"No, he'll be satisfied. You see, this is his last card. If she failed, he'll not care to fight the will case any longer. He knows he's beaten, and he can't pay his lawyers. He'll offer to compromise, and I shall tell Van Asten to make a reasonable offer."

"The girl failed, then, in whatever she went for?"

"No, she succeeded."

"Then won't Dreilmont find out about it, and make more trouble?"

"I hope he'll leave immediately. If he accepts a sum of money to compromise, I think he'll quit New York without delay."

"Oh. And you expect to keep this girl hidden away from him till then?"

"Exactly. This blizzard was a Godsend for Van Asten and Miss Dreilmont."

"Well, I don't understand yet what she went to his rooms for; but I'll do my part."

IT was just nine o'clock, and the fair unknown was sleeping quietly, when Valeska rang up the Swastika Hotel and inquired for Dreilmont. After a moment there was a reply.

"It's I, Paul," she said. "I'm awfully sorry; but I couldn't get down there and do the business." Valeska dropped the receiver with a shocked expression.

"What did he say?" Astro asked.

"I refuse to tell you." Valeska put up the instrument and rose.

"Didn't he even ask where you were?"

"No, indeed."

"Then it's as I suspected. Dreilmont has been playing on this girl; making love to her, probably, in order to use her as his tool. Now she's failed, he has no further use for her. Well, I think it serves her right. Perhaps it will teach

her a lesson. Now I'll give my instructions to Van Asten."

He rang up the lawyer. After the conversation he returned to Valeska and said:

"He's agreed to compromise, if Dreilmont calls. The janitor told him this lady presented a typewritten note, with his name forged to it, inviting her to wait in his apartment for him. That's how she got in there. I suggested that he hint at prosecuting Dreilmont for blackmail, on the strength of that episode, and he has agreed to suggest to the rascal that he leave town immediately as one of the conditions of the compromise. But it's a ticklish game, altogether. I don't know whether I ought to explain everything to Van Asten or not."

"Why, I should think he ought to know," said Valeska.

"Why, then, you haven't solved the mystery of the lady's errand?" he asked.

"I confess I haven't."

"Well, then, I'll tell you. It's so ingenious and simple that you'd probably never get it alone. The fact is, that she went down there to erase the date on the will. This she did, and then wrote in the same date,—July 1, 1908. I saw it immediately I cast my eyes on the document. When I saw the broken bottle at the foot of the airshaft, I suspected that she had thrown away some damaging evidence. When I noticed that spot on the blotter where the ink had been bleached, I was sure of it. The only question, then, was whether Van Asten himself hadn't taken the paper home to tamper with it. But, as the date was right, he couldn't have."

"What was her, or rather Dreilmont's, reason for putting in the same date, then?"

"Why, so that when the will was probated they could call attention to the erasure and subsequent rewriting. That would cast suspicion on the whole document, and no doubt the first will would be accepted as legal."

"Oh, it was simple, wasn't it? But you didn't tell Van Asten?"

"No, not yet. I want him to offer the will for probate as it is. You see, it is undoubtedly genuine; but if it had been tampered with, he'd never be willing to handle it. I got that from my study of his character. I'm going to take the responsibility on myself. If Dreilmont leaves town before he can communicate with this lady, whoever she is, he'll never know that she succeeded, and Van Asten and Miss Dreilmont will be safe. When this blonde lady finds that she has been abandoned, she won't care to play in his hands, especially as it may get her into trouble herself."

LATE that afternoon, as Valeska was busy in the little laboratory off the studio, she saw a shadow pass swiftly toward the waiting room. It was the mysterious blonde. Valeska waited and listened.

"Give me Madison Square 2615 . . . Hello! Is Mr. Dreilmont there? . . . He's left? Why, that's impossible! . . . This afternoon? Where did he go? . . . No address? . . . Are you sure?" The receiver went on the hook with a snap.

Valeska waited to see what she would do next. A few minutes later she stole to the portières and looked into the waiting room. No one was there!

WELL, said Astro, "you should have followed her. That girl was clever. Anyone who could act as well as she did with Van Asten would be a valuable assistant. I might have used her."

Valeska's fine lips curled. "I think one assistant is enough for you, sir! She was altogether too blonde. I always distrust that kind!"

The seer smiled and tossed a kiss airily at her.

"Well, as for that, I prefer blondes, myself."

The next "Seer of Secrets" story, "The Middlebury Murder," will appear April 25.

Proposing as a Fine Art

Continued from page 4

his heart before his shrine; but by what right is he there?

I have heard men say that no man proposes to a woman without at least a hope that she will accept him. Nevertheless, few women exist who have not the memory of some utterly unexpected and harrowing proposal. Lillian Russell told recently of having received an offer from an unknown butter-and-eggs man, who urged her to abandon the stage, become his bride, and lead a Christian life. I have no doubt the butter-and-eggs man felt that he was conferring an honor; but he didn't show it. In this he proved his superiority to the most condescending class of proposals, which in my own mind I have set down as the "King Cophetua Variety."

"Cophetua swear a royal oath:
"This beggar maid shall be my queen!"

When Cophetua Came—and Went

IN my own case Cophetua was forsworn most royally. But every woman is familiar with his type,—the assured, bored, rather intelligent man of the world,—just stupid enough not to appreciate that his vast amount of money means nothing to a woman making a competent income by the exercise of a congenial profession.

In vain, when Cophetua urged upon me, of course quite impersonally and vaguely, the advantages of a wealthy marriage, would I reply, "Why should I marry except because I choose? Why should I select a husband for any other reason than I would a gown or a sideboard, because he pleased me the best," he would only smile tolerantly, serene in the belief that as soon as he made up his mind I would change mine. At last he decided. Strangely enough, it was several weeks after his mother and father—good, old fashioned, self made Americans—had endeavored to make his path straight by

writing to me. "I've given you a chance to choose between my three sons. Now which are you going to take?" wrote the old banker. His wife's letter was less explicit; but in tone was distinctly maternal in law.

Some six weeks later Cophetua took me out to dinner. He seemed astonished when I declined intoxicants, and notwithstanding my refusal ordered champagne for himself. Before the dinner was over this dispelled even the faint chances he didn't have; for I discovered that the wine was going, not to his head, but straight to the tip of his pink, retroussé nose. When the nose was at its pinkest he uttered this novel proposal, scarcely pausing over the partridge before him, which seemed to interest him quite as much as I.

"It will surprise you to know I decided to marry you two years ago. But that's a fact; first time I ever saw you at mother's. But I was mixed up then with a young widow, a very wealthy woman. We used to meet in London every year. She would sail May 1, and I on May 5. It took sometime— Well, you know I just had to get away decently. She sailed last week; I was to sail to-day. Just got a cable from her; but I sha'n't answer it, of course, little girl. Now suppose we send a telegram to mother?"

Was there ever such Cophetua-like complacency? Not only was he practically offering to desert another woman, but I was to be his accomplice in it. All of which he gaily took for granted. But not for long.

The next day, a wiser and humbler man, he answered the cablegram, and to-day he and the widow are married.

And I? Well, I have still to receive any offer that combines sense, sentiment, and sincerity in those proportions which, for me, would make proposing a fine art.

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